DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 258 245 CS 209 041

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TITLE The Riotous Aftermath of the 1984 World Series: A Comparison of Prestige Press Coverage with Local Coverage.
PUB DATE Aug 85
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (68th, Memphis, TN, August 3-6, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Athletics; *Baseball; Comparative Analysis; *Content Analysis; News Media; *Newspapers; *News Reporting; Team Sports
IDENTIFIERS *Local Media; *National Media; World Series

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine whether differences existed between national media and local media in their coverage of events that have national interest. Coverage of the riotous aftermath of the 1984 World Series in Detroit was examined by comparing Detroit's daily newspapers with other United States dailies. The hypothesis was that stories in the Detroit newspapers would report a greater proportion of favorable assertions about the aftermath of the 1984 World Series than stories in the nation's prestige press. Coverage of the event was determined by looking at issues of Detroit's two dailies, the "News" and the "Free Press," and 13 prestigious national daily newspapers for October 15, 16, and 17. The units of analysis were evaluative statements (statements that clearly took a side concerning an issue surrounding the event) contained in stories of the World Series aftermath. The findings generally supported the hypothesis. However, the contrast between favorable and unfavorable stories was not as great in the sports sections of the newspapers as it was in the news stories. (DF)

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THE RIOTOUS AFTERMATH OF THE 1984 WORLD SERIES: A COMPARISON OF PRESTIGE PRESS COVERAGE WITH LOCAL COVERAGE

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Paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism, Mass Communication and Society Division, Memphis, Tennessee, August 1985.

CS209041

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of the study was to determine whether differences existed between national media and local media in their coverage of events that have national interest. To investigate that question, coverage of the riotous aftermath of the 1984 World Series in Detroit was examined by comparing Detroit's daily newspapers with other U.S. dailies.

It was hypothesized that stories in the Detroit daily newspapers would have a greater proportion of positive assertions about the aftermath than stories in the nation's prestige newspapers.

A content analysis of stories from October 15, 16 and 17 in the Detroit Free Press and The Detroit News and 13 prestigous newspapers revealed a significantly greater proportion of positive assertions in the Detroit dailies than in the prestige press. In the sports sections, however, no significant difference existed between coverage of the Detroit dailies and the nation's prestige press. In news sections, significant differences existed.

When on October 14, 1984, the Detroit Tigers won their first world championship since 1968, and the first where the final game was won in Detroit since 1935, much of what the nation initially learned about the event was not the joy of victory or the big plays. Instead they learned that "one man was shot to death, dozens were injured and at least 34 were arrested when World Series celebrators turned violent, torching cars, battling with riot-ready police and leaving streets littered with burnt-out vehicles and broken glass."[1]

That typical front-page account from the Seattle Times, compiled from various news services, was accompanied by a 9 1/2-by-7-inch color photograph from the Associated Press showing a riot-ravaged scene. The photograph, which received heavy exposure in much of the nation's newspapers, portrayed an enthusiastic fan displaying a Tiger pennant in the foreground. This scene and the subsequent negative publicity came as a blow to Detroit. The city had enjoyed a summer of relatively positive media coverage, thanks largely to the success of its baseball team and an upswing in the auto industry. City officials anticipated that national exposure for the Tigers during the World Series would be positive for the city's image. Many government officials, including Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, placed the blame on the media themselves for Detroit's negative image, especially Detroit's two daily newspapers.[2] During the year preceding the World Series, Mayor Young commissioned a study of the Detroit news media's coverage of alleged political corruption. The research concluded that coverage was racist and biased.[3] A few weeks after the World Series,

Mayor Young, state legislators and other officials castigated the Detroit press for creating or at least perpetuating the city's negative image.[4]

The Detroit Free Press and The Detroit News, however, were openly critical of how the national media covered the events that followed the 1984 World Series. The Free Press even went so far as to reprint a negative story by a sports columnist from the Palm Beach Post.[5] The paper provided readers with an address to protest the unfavorable story.[6] Three months later, when the San Francisco 49ers won the Super Bowl and violence followed, the Detroit papers reminded readers that violent outbreaks after sports events are not unique to Detroit. The Detroit papers reminded readers that the Detroit disturbance, which resulted in 46 arrests, was reported as a "riot" in much of nation's press. However, the San Francisco disturbance, which resulted in at least 23[illegible] arrests, was reported as "a laid-back California party."[7]

The disagreement between Detroit's politicians and its news media raises important questions: Is there a difference between coverage by local and national media of events that have national interest? Is there a difference between sports and news coverage of the events? And if so, what is the nature of the difference?

The empirical literature on media coverage of riots, most of which was conducted during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, suggests that local media tend to portray the home city in a more favorable light than the national media.[8] What also emerges in the literature is a positive correlation between newspaper reporting and orientations of the audience served. In a content

analysis of the coverage of the 1967 Detroit riots by 10 Detroit suburban newspapers, Rosenthal found that the greater the black population and the farther from Detroit, the more the papers emphasized the "problems-and-solutions" approach to riots. Meanwhile, the lower the proportion of black residents and the closer to Detroit, the more likely the papers were to emphasize preparedness and control of riots.[9] The Kerner Commission report, the official version of how the media covered the 1967 civil disorders, did not distinguish between national and local media, but noted some sensationalism, distortion and inaccuracy in coverage.[10] Although the report was favorable toward news media coverage in general, it also included some criticisms.[11]

The disorders of the late 1960s and early 1970s share some outward similarities with the riotous aftermath of the 1984 World Series. Both share scenes of burning cars, helmeted police and random violence to individuals. But there are important differences. Protesters in the '60s and '70s rioted over social injustice, not a sports victory. Racial tensions also distinguished many of the disturbances of 15 and 20 years earlier. These differences are important to the present study because violent disturbances absent justifiable causes are not likely to arouse the sympathy of the public or the national media. Another aspect worth noting is that because the national media did not anticipate a disturbance, they frequently did not have news reporters covering the World Series or its aftermath. Rather, sports writers--unprepared for the disturbance that followed the last game--were at the scene.

As a result of the questions raised concerning how reporters in Detroit and elsewhere in the nation portrayed the aftermath of the World Series, this study sought to test the following hypothesis: Stories in the Detroit newspapers will report a greater proportion of favorable assertions about the aftermath of the 1984 World Series than stories in the nation's prestige press.

METHOD

The disturbance outside Tiger Stadium occurred during the evening of October 14, 1984. Coverage of the event was examined by looking at issues of Detroit's two dailies, The News and the Free Press, and 13 prestigious U.S. daily newspapers during October 15, 16 and 17. The prestigious dailies were chosen on the basis of a recent survey of editors, publishers and academicians that rated the nation's top 15 dailies.[12] The Wall Street Journal and The Christian Science Monitor made the "Top 15" list, but were not included in this study because they have no regional base. The regional base requirement is important for this study because the theoretical rationale asserts that distance from an event results in less favorable coverage. The prestigious dailies examined were: The New York Times, The Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, the Chicago Tribune, The Miami Herald, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Boston Globe, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the St. Petersburg Times, the Louisville Courier-Journal, The Milwaukee Journal, Newsday (of Long Island, N.Y.), and the Atlanta Constitution. The Detroit papers contained 15

stories relating to the disturbance and the prestigious papers carried 51 stories. Editorials were not examined because often they make no pretense of balance.

Prestige papers were selected because (1) it is worthwhile to compare coverage of the same event by newspapers of similar quality, (2) these papers are considered America's best, and (3) if the coverage by papers of this caliber is questionable, the performance of other newspapers might also be questionable. Although neither of the Detroit newspapers made the "Top 15" list, the Free Press was singled out in the study as a regionally prestigious newspaper.[13]

The units of analysis were evaluative statements contained in stories about the World Series aftermath. Evaluative statements were defined as statements that clearly took a side concerning an issue surrounding the event. A review of the controversy surrounding the aftermath revealed six issues relating to the riotous aftermath story. For each issue a positive and negative assertion existed, making a total of 12 assertions (see Table 1). Assertions repeated in a story were coded for every occurrence. Direct quotes and attributed statements were included in the analysis because reporters and editors act as gatekeepers and decide which direct quotes and statements to report.[14]

The use of evaluative statements as the units of analysis does not in itself infer fairness or unfairness. Fairness should not be conceptualized as objectivity, which exists only in the theoretical realm, but rather as "balance."[15] Thus, if the papers

are being fair, positive and negative assertions about the event should be roughly proportionate. Coders were instructed to pick the best assertion for each statement, but were permitted to multi-code statements. Each fourth statement was recorded and re-coded to test intercoder reliability. The intercoder reliability coefficient was .83, a level deemed sufficient because there were 12 categories. The likelihood of intercoder reliability was .08 by chance.

RESULTS

A total of 616 evaluative statements were examined: 439 in the prestige papers and 177 in the Detroit papers; 249 in the news sections and 367 in the sports sections. All the statements in the Detroit papers were in staff written stories, not a surprising finding when one considers the preference newspapers usually have for assigning their own reporters to cover events in their circulation areas. In contrast, nearly half (48%) of the evaluative statements in the prestige papers came from wire-service stories.

To test the hypothesis, the percentage of favorable statements in the Detroit papers and the prestige papers were compared (see Table 2). The findings generally support the hypothesis. For four of the six issues, the Detroit papers were significantly more favorable than the prestige papers. Two of these were significant at the .001 level. The two issues for which the hypothesis was not affirmed concerned whether authorities had control over the situation and whether there was danger of personal injury.

More than 80 percent of the statements in the Detroit papers reflected favorably on Detroit and Detroiters concerning three issues: whether most of the city was calm, whether a similar disturbance could have occurred elsewhere, and whether outsiders were largely responsible for the disturbance. In contrast, about one-fifth of the statements concerning whether most fans acted properly and whether most of the city was calm were reported favorably in the prestige press. The majority of prestige papers, however, reported that a similar disturbance could have occurred elsewhere.

Table 3 presents the proportion of favorable assertions about the six issues in the sports sections. Only a small proportion of the statements in the Detroit papers was reported in the in the sports section (24%). In contrast, nearly three-quarters of the statements in the prestige press were reported in the sports sections. This indicates that the Detroit papers considered the riotous aftermath of the World Series a news event rather than a sports event, and devoted most of the coverage to the news sections. The prestige papers reported the event primarily in the sports pages.

Overall, the findings yielded little evidence for the second hypothesis. Only in the case of whether most of the city was calm did the Detroit press report a greater proportion of positive statements than the prestige papers. The small number of assertions in the sports pages of the Detroit papers made obtaining statistical significance difficult.

Table 4 presents the proportion of the favorable assertions

about the issues in the news sections. The Detroit papers reported significantly more favorably than the prestige press concerning three of the issues. With the issue concerning whether authorities had control over the situation, the prestige press reported significantly more favorably than did the Detroit newspapers.

DISCUSSION

The data presented in the previous section indicate support for the hypothesis. On four of the six issues, the Detroit dailies were more positive at a statistically significant level. The other two comparisons show similarities between the Detroit papers and the nation's prestige papers.

When the results are broken down by placement in the paper (news section vs. sports section), however, the data indicate that news sections of the Detroit papers were more favorable to the city than were the sports sections. In sports sections, only the case of one of the issues ("Most of the city was calm") shows Detroit papers significantly more positive than prestige papers. In the news sections, the Detroit newspapers are more positive than the prestige press for three of the issues, but are significantly more negative in the case of one: "Authorities had control over the situation."

Perhaps the best explanation for this finding is a newspaper's perceived mission to criticize government institutions, in this case, the Detroit Police Department. In

fact, news stories contained quotes questioning the judgment of city officials to hold promotion examinations the morning of the game. Detroit City Council members took the police chief to task for spreading manpower too thin. And several newspaper columnists criticized on-duty police officers for not making enough arrests. In essence, stories about the aftermath in the Detroit papers, most of which were in the news sections, reflected a concern over the capabilities of the police. On the other hand, the Detroit papers generally came to the defense of Detroiters celebrating the Tigers' championship. They portrayed most of the fans as acting properly and most of the city as calm, and they noted that the disturbance was not unique to Detroit. Prestige papers were favorable on this last point, also, perhaps because many of those covering the story had experienced similar incidents following sporting events.

It also stands to reason that out-of-town newspapers would be less negative over the capabilities of the police because they would be less likely to explore underlying reasons related to politics and personalities. In other words, the out-of-town reporters from the prestige press--mostly sports writers--were not about to go deeper than what occurred after the game.

This raises another interesting finding: the difference in where the story was played. Not surprisingly, the Free Press and The News played the aftermath story on the front page and jumped it inside the "A" section. But the prestige papers generally ran a wire story on the front page, relying on sports writers covering the game to provide sidebars and columns in the sports

sections. Previous research indicating that riot coverage by journalists unfamiliar with civil disturbances results in distortions and inaccuracies may lend support to the findings here. It could have been the same lack of familiarity that resulted in the overwhelmingly negative approach in the sports sections of the prestige press. On the other hand, "boosterism" may have been a factor for the favorable coverage of the disturbances in the Detroit newspapers. Both lack of knowledge and lack of sympathy for Detroit by the out-of-town papers and boosterism of the hometown by the Detroit newspapers may have been factors in the findings in this study.

NOTES

[1] Seattle Times, Oct. 15, 1984, p.1.

[2] Thulani Davis, "Black Mayors: Can They Make Cities Work?" Mother Jones, July 1984, pp.30-41.

[3] Lee B. Becker, Thomas A. Schwartz and Sharon C. West, A Report on Media Coverage of Magnum and Vista, Ohio State University, January 1984.

[4] David Kushma, "Young: Media Helped Dirty Detroit's Image," Detroit Free Press, Nov. 29, 1984, pp. 1A, 16A.

[5] Reprinted, Steve Hummer, "Detroit Painted Ugly: Was Portrait Fair?" Detroit Free Press, Oct. 21, 1984, pp. 1B, 6B.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Peter G. Gavrilovich, "SF Police Arrest 235 in Victory Celebration," Detroit Free Press, Jan. 22, 1985, p.1.

[8] David L. Paletz and Robert Dunn, "Press Coverage of Civil Disorder: A Case Study of Winston-Salem," Public Opinion Quarterly 33: 328-345 (1969); Sheldon G. Levy, "Communications During the Detroit Riot," Journalism Quarterly 48: 339-348 (1971); Mitchell Shapiro and Wenmouth Williams Jr., "Civil Disturbance in Miami: Proximity and Conflict in Newspaper Coverage," Newspaper Research Journal, Spring 1984, 61-69.

[9] Marilyn M. Rosenthal, "Riot News: The Press, the Spread of Opinion, and Demographic Self-Interest," Communication Research 5: 176-201 (1978).

[10] Report of The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1968), pp. 202-203.

[11] Ibid.

[12] "Best In the USA: Top 15 Dailies Picked by 610 News Leaders," Editor & Publisher, June 11, 1983, p. 11.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Mitchell Stephens and Nadyne G. Edison, "News Media Coverage of Issues During the Accident at Three-Mile Island," Journalism Quarterly 59: 199-204, 259 (1982).

[15] Michael Schudson, Discovering the News (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

TABLE 1

Assertions from the Riotous Aftermath of the World Series

Positive	Negative
1. Authorities had control over the situation. (e.g., From what I saw, the Detroit policemen deserve to be commended for their restraint, their poise and their professionalism.)	2. Authorities had no control over the situation. (e.g., Attempts by police to disperse the crowd met with limited success.
3. Most fans acted properly. (e.g., "Everyone knows there was no riot," Young said. "A few jerks caused us a problem.")	4. Most fans were rowdy. (e.g., They [the fans] were like sharks in a feeding frenzy.)
5. Most of the city was calm. (e.g., Elsewhere [in Detroit] the celebration was more peaceful.)	6. Much (or all) of the city was disorderly. (e.g., Just another day in Detroit, nice place [written ironically].)
7. A similar disturbance could have occurred elsewhere. (e.g., What happened in Detroit could have taken place in Philadelphia or New York or your favorite Chicago zip code.)	8. The disturbance was typical of Detroit. (e.g., What is it about this town that attracts violence?)
9. The disturbance was caused largely by people from outside Detroit. (e.g., Those fires weren't set by people from Detroit.)	10. Detroiters were largely responsible for the disturbance. (e.g., The fans in this town are ugly.)
11. There was little danger of personal injury. (e.g., I was out on the streets that day and saw nothing like what I read in the newspaper.)	12. The situation was life-threatening. (e.g., Street vendor Ron Smith clung to his pennant. "I'm just preying to survive," he said.)

TABLE 2

Comparison of Favorable Assertions

	Detroit % Favorable	Prestige % Favorable	Significance
1) Authorities had control over the situation.	22.2 (n=45)	23.8 (n=80)	n.s.
2) Most fans acted properly.	56.9 (n=65)	18.3 (n=131)	$p < .001$
3) Most of the city was calm.	85.0 (n=20)	20.7 (n=82)	$p < .001$
4) A similar disturbance could have or has happened elsewhere.	88.9 (n=18)	62.2 (n=37)	$p < .05$
5) The disturbance was caused largely by suburbanites and others from outside Detroit.	81.8 (n=11)	47.4 (n=19)	$p < .05$
6) There was little danger of personal injury.	5.6 (n=18)	6.7 (n=90)	n.s.
TOTAL	50.8 (n=177)	22.3 (n=439)	$p < .001$

NOTE: Ns equal total number of assertions, positive and negative.

TABLE 3

Comparison of Favorable Assertions
in Sports Sections

	Detroit % Favorable	Prestige % Favorable	Significance
1) Authorities had control over the situation.	25.0 (n=4)	14.0 (n=57)	n.s.
2) Most fans acted properly.	27.8 (n=18)	13.5 (n=89)	n.s.
3) Most of the city was calm.	83.3 (n=6)	20.7 (n=58)	$p < .001$
4) A similar disturbance could have or has happened elsewhere.	33.3 (n=3)	61.3 (n=31)	n.s.
5) The disturbance was caused largely by suburbanites and others from outside Detroit.	0.0 (n=1)	40.0 (n=15)	n.s.
6) There was little danger of personal injury.	0.0 (n=11)	6.8 (n=74)	n.s.
TOTAL	27.9 (n=43)	19.3 (n=324)	n.s.

NOTE: Ns equal total number of assertions, positive and negative.

TABLE 4

Comparison of Favorable Assertions
in News Sections

	Detroit % Favorable	Prestige % Favorable	Significance
1) Authorities had control over the situation.	22.0 (n=41)	47.8 (n=23)	$p < .05$
2) Most fans acted properly.	68.1 (n=47)	28.6 (n=42)	$p < .001$
3) Most of the city was calm.	85.7 (n=14)	20.8 (n=24)	$p < .001$
4) A similar disturbance could have or has happened elsewhere.	100.0 (n=15)	66.7 (n=6)	$p < .01$
5) The disturbance was caused largely by suburbanites and others from outside Detroit.	90.0 (n=10)	75.0 (n=4)	n.s.
6) There was little danger of personal injury.	14.3 (n=7)	6.3 (n=16)	n.s.
TOTAL	58.2 (n=134)	31.9 (n=115)	n.s.

NOTE: Ns equal total number of assertions, positive and negative.